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THE NEED OF BELIEF AS A FACTOR IN RECONSTRUCTION

by Henry Beston

No historical development of the present year is more worthy of attention than the failure of Britain to respond to the stimulus of the post-war American and Canadian credits. The blood-transfusion of money has merely served to keep the sick economy alive. The weakened body of the nation remains unable to use the borrowed strength in rallying its own forces of recovery. Meanwhile the wheels idle, a will to work does not seem to rise to reinforce the will to live, and the grim, short days of the overclouded English winter are at hand.

If the great dole or loan has failed to restore even Britain to economic health, and there seems to be no firm indication of such a recovery, it is time for realistic minds to consider two questions of vital importance: first, whether the crisis in Europe is entirely or even primarily economic; and second, the power of money to cure spiritual and moral injury. It is granted that in Britain certain forces are at work which are peculiar to that country alone. Few pause to realize how devastatingly a complete crash of prestige, together with a sudden recognition of poverty and weakness, can be dispiriting to a people who have for generations been accustomed, even schooled, to consider themselves as the rulers of the world.

On the other hand, one must remember on the physical side that though Britain was badly knocked about from the air, the island was never occupied, and not only remained in charge of its own house, but was also lend-leased in the neighborhood of thirty billion by the Roosevelt Administration.

If Britain has made no response to money, what can one say of the ravaged nations within Fortress Europe? Since V-E Day, our Federal Government has poured from its seeming horn of plenty billions more into the rubble. Yet what we are now called upon to face is a crisis of Western civilization. It is to be noted that coincident with this crisis the end of the horn of plenty begins to have a hollow sound and that the national well-being is showing increasingly dangerous symptoms of a burden too great for economic health.

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The crisis in Europe is only in one aspect economic. It is at bottom a crisis of the European spirit. Wandering in the dead cities and the night of poverty, hunger and threat of further violence, the peoples of Europe have been unable to find those foundations of positive belief which are necessary to rebuilding, if rebuild they can.

II

The question, so to speak, is less of Europe than of the European. The malady of the Continent is not so much the ruined bridge, nor the lack of transportation and tractors, but rather an illness of the spirit which can only be expressed in the cruel phrase "the death of the heart". As the wounded civilization enters a third year after the Axis collapse it becomes clear that a war of unspeakable hypocrisies and a lunatic exhilaration of destruction has done more than strike down the civilized inheritance. It has cut at the roots of life itself. The world is now having its first uneasy glimpse of what happens when human beings are compelled to live in social and economic ruin without the hope which enables humanity to go on.

What has taken place in Europe is essentially the destruction of the past. No historical process can be more completely hazardous, since it leads to an improvised future on an improvised base. Too much cannot be made of the effect of the savage and widespread destruction which was as needless as it was barbarian, like the massacre of Dresden. Where the cities have been given to the flames, we cannot look for any change except for the worse. If the roots of civilization are in the countryside, the flower of the mood is an urban unfolding.

What is clearly inevitable is a lowering of the standard of civilized life in those regions of despair, indeed, in every region of the crisis. Fragments of the past it is true, are still a part of European life, but these are like fragments of a building one sees in a museum, having no true place in the present and no roots to live by. Moreover, not only in the warring world but everywhere, the development of the atomic bomb is haunting man with the troubling thought that no work of his hands, no accumulations of his spirit and genius, are henceforth safe. His material world has taken on a new and tense uncertainty.

Together with this material destruction of the past, has gone a destruction of the social structure. From one end of the Continent to the other, whole populations have been robbed of any economic future, and condemned to a future which is scarcely human. Allied attempts to get things going are faced not only with the debris of a war, but with the grim wreckage and new gulfs of a social revolution. Unable to earn,

and economically ruined, the middle class sinks into the proletariat, passing through a gate inscribed with Dante's "All hope abandon ye who enter here".

To this social darkness of the middle-class European world, one is compelled to add a source of national hopelessness which is of profound importance in any human estimate of the contemporary scene. This is the complete destruction of any European faith in a new social order of European origin. The concept of the corporate State, with which the middle classes of Europe faced the breakdown of the individualistic economy and the threat of a Marxian revolution, has been removed from history by forces arriving from outside the Continent. Historically considered, this means for many a European a forced return to political concepts which are essentially meaningless. At the moment the cultured European lives in a vacuum. As an Italian scholar said recently: "My politics are to stay alive."

III

The material and the social past being thus shaken, one must reflect upon what has happened to the past which is of the spirit and the mind. In what state is that background of the human spirit which enables man to create societies and dwell in them as a civilized being? Collectively this background is the treasury of man's civilized usages, conventions, standards, disciplines, moralities and aspirations. To witness the scattering of this treasure is to witness nothing less than the dehumanization of man.

Unwilling as we may be to admit it, we have been witnessing even such a dispersal. The truth of the matter is that the past of man as a creature of the human spirit is as shaken spiritually and morally as is the material heritage. Our moral sanctions are cracked open. Our civilized usages and restraints have ceased to have any meaning in modern warfare. Our pretenses and propaganda are every day coming into clearer light as so much self-righteous and self-deceptive humbug.

A typical instance of the general degrading is the history of the submarine during the era of the two wars. Having fought War I largely on the dynamism of a popular response to an adroit and emotionalized campaign against the sinking -- without warning -- of war cargo ships by submarines, our submarines, in the recent war, sank without warning every Japanese ship they could possibly ambush or overtake. As this is the only way the submarine can be used, Mr. Wilson's rather unreal legalism did not deter us one moment when the advantage was on our side. The victorious "peace-loving" nations have permitted the tragedy of the deportations, the continuing slavery of the prisoners of

war, and -- supreme hypocrisy -- have invented, used and now stockpile the atomic horror, while scolding morally at the feeble bombs of the former enemy.

The result of this double standard of morality -- one for ourselves, one for the enemy -- the fatal outcome of this expediency is a lost world. There is nothing left to believe in. The old know the whole business to be essentially a fraud. The young are born skeptics. That aspect of belief which one calls "faith" simply does not exist. And without belief there is little hope of building anything at all. Men can live by myths but not by lies.

IV

I have been discussing Europe because it is spiritually more akin to us than Asia, and because in Europe the crash of Western civilization sounds most loudly in our ears. But in Asia one sees evidence of the same moral ruin. The ironically hopeful difference is that since Asia has never been wholly Westernized, so collapse of European values there may reveal a tough substructure which will hold its own, when all the Western proconsuls and imperial camp followers have been withdrawn, as were the Roman eagles from Britain fifteen hundred years ago.

Were proof needed that the European crisis is one of the spirit, and not of materials and money, one has but to look honestly at the other side of the "iron curtain". There a materialism as unnatural to man as walking on all fours has taken over the captive nations, and if we are to credit a number of rather unwilling witnesses, the reconstruction of the foundations of society is well ahead of what one sees to the west. What is present there which is not present in Western Europe? The answer is, belief, and the purpose and hope springing from belief.

The West will have to find a belief of parallel intensity and recover honesty, or lose the game. Hope will have to give a sign of still being locked in Pandora's box. And the call of Hope must be loud enough to be heard by the young. We must feed such of Europe as can no longer sustain itself, thanks to the destruction and the vengeful policies which have prevented reconstruction. Charity is a first duty. But without the aid of Faith and Hope, Charity alone will never carry the day.

America cannot merely drop money with negligent good will in the lap of a legless man, saying: "Here fellow, grow yourself some new legs".

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By Frank C. Hanighen

October 29, 1947

Myths die hard. There are doubtless millions of people who still believe in the accuracy of statements in that extraordinary propaganda volume, Mission to Moscow, authored by the Hon. Joseph E. Davies. Innumerable persons probably still give credence to the story therein, that Marshal Tukachevsky and various "Trotskyite wild beasts" (that is, old Bolsheviks like Zinoviev and Bukharin) had plotted with Hitler and the Nazis to overthrow the Soviet Union. Will the State Department give these dupes the facts for their necessary disillusion?

We learn from reliable State Department sources that there exists absolutely no evidence for the yarn in the only documents which could positively confirm it. The German archives, the closely kept papers of the German Foreign Office and the secret reports of the German Intelligence Service, would provide this confirmation if the story were true. U. S. Government experts have been ransacking these archives (captured by the U. S. Army) for the past year and a half. These experts report that not one line, not one word, in these secret German papers gives a trace of confirmation to the charges against Tukachevsky and the other alleged "plotters" who were executed in the great Moscow purges of the Thirties. Secretary Byrnes, in his book Speaking Frankly, lifted a corner of the veil of secrecy from these German documents. For the essential task of "de-bamboozling" the American people, the State Department might well publish the reports based on these archives.

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Mr. Eric Johnston professes to believe that the House Committee investigating un-American activities in Hollywood is trying to discredit the whole movie industry. And Mr. Parnell Thomas, Chairman of the Committee, retorts that Mr. Johnston has not given his investigators full co-operation. Washington observers are amused because the investigation (at least in its opening sessions) looked like an attempt to picture the movie magnates as either innocent victims of designing Communists or as stout fighters against subversive minority. In other words, it might be more accurate to describe the hearings as a whitewash -- in kleig lights -- of the movie industry, than a "smear".

The movie producers, in their curious publicity-seeking way, seem to have missed no opportunity to capitalize on the business. Thus, Mr. Mayer was questioned about coming films, of an anti-Communist nature. He promptly replied that he was making one such film, to be called "The American Dream" -- "in technicolor", he obligingly added and repeated.

Whatever the diverting aspects of the hearings, the uproar in certain sections of the press against the Committee is deadly serious. The proceedings, of course, are no "witch hunt", or "reactionary red-baiting", as alleged by some critics. The hearings have nothing to do with the question of whether a man is a Marxist or not. This is seen in the fact that no effort whatever is made (or, indeed, should be made) to bring in the Socialists or their various "fronts". The Socialists are honest adversaries of the capitalist system and are not the agents of Moscow. It is the activities of agents or stooges of that foreign Power which are the real target of the Committee's earnest probings.

The matter, to repeat, is serious. The Communists fear that it will lead to popular demand for suppression of their party. The stooges fear exposure. Hence the uproar over "civil liberties". Those who have done the Moscow work in press, pulpit, college and in the Government are, to say the least, anxious. And there are some frightened men on Capitol Hill.

It has been no secret for a long time that a number of the Communist brethren have installed themselves as speech-writers, research assistants and secretaries of some Senators and Congressmen. They have succeeded in using these members of Congress very effectively to propagate various bits and pieces of the "line". Now some of these members may have been "innocents"; although others must have been aware of the situation. Innocents or not, probing by the Committee on Un-American Activities may lead to some Congressional doors; and the men behind those doors would then find it embarrassing to explain matters to their constituents.

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The campaign against the hearings of the Un-American Activities Committee is, of course, part of the perpetual drive to discredit Congress. Let such a committee make a tiny slip and the pack is down on it in a trice. Meanwhile, the torts of the Executive branch get off lightly, if reported at all. Yet the Executive is often guilty of maneuvers which, if Congress were the guilty party, would receive much publicity. One of these took place in the past week.

Members of the press went to an off-the-record "background" conference by a permanent agency of the Government. Functionaries then proceeded to explain how hard the agency was working on the "Marshall plan", and added a lot of history all of which months ago appeared in the press. After about an hour of this, the press became restless; some newsmen indignantly walked out, while others fired questions to which they got no satisfactory answer. The meeting finally broke up, with remaining newsmen asking, "Why was this farce staged?"

One answer seemed plausible. The Harriman Committee has been getting a very good press; and other agencies of the Government concerned with the "plan" have become jealous. Hence, the conference was staged to emphasize that the particular permanent agency concerned was doing a lot of fine work. The conference was badly presented, and a failure. But, even so, it illustrates how Government agencies waste time and seek to indoctrinate the press for their own aggrandizement. This agency, it should be repeated, was an Executive body, not Legislative.

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The Republican Party is in serious trouble in Connecticut, where there exists a situation which has drawn surprisingly little attention from either the Democratic or Republican press. On October 6, municipal elections were held which resulted in a wave of defeats for Republican candidates, successes for Democrats and, among other things, the election of a Socialist mayor in Norwalk. This wide rejection of Republican candidates by the voters, indeed, is regarded as unprecedented in Connecticut's political history. If an election were held tomorrow, all politicians agree, the Republicans would go down to defeat.

No national policies of the GOP were reportedly at issue or substantially contributed to the debacle. Our correspondents in that area assign the major blame to the new Connecticut sales tax, sponsored by the state Republican administration. The tax, says one correspondent, "is hated by all classes of the population. It is a heavy burden on every merchant and a great annoyance to customers. I myself have waited a full five minutes at the cash register while a clerk computed the tax."

The responsibility lies squarely on the shoulders of Governor James L. McConaughy and the unwary legislature which passed the sales tax bill. The Republican Party now realizes its mistake and the bill will undoubtedly be repealed at the next session. But meanwhile much harm has been done to Republican prestige, and Democrats rejoice.

Some Republicans fear that it may, however, be too late to save the Republicans at the next election. The liability could conceivably drag down the GOP in this

key state in November, 1948. At any rate, those who try to appraise the national chances of the two parties in '48 must take this situation into account.

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Will Soviet Russia soon turn its attention to the Near East? On its long diplomatic fighting line, Moscow shifts from one spot to another, feeling out -- as it were -- the soft areas where progress might be made. Let the Soviet offensive meet with some firm resistance in, say, Europe, then one may expect some conspicuous probing in the Far East, the Arctic, or the Near East. A little-noted event in Iran may give the Kremlin strategists an excuse for bestowing added attention on the Near East, where the Soviet has already inserted itself in the Palestine situation.

On October 22, the Iranian parliament -- the Majlis -- not only rejected a proposal for "joint" Russo-Iranian exploitation of the northern Iranian oil fields, but also passed a drastic five-point law against granting any or all foreign oil concessions. Now, the joint exploitation proposal arose over a year ago when Iranian Premier Quavam was seeking to get the Soviet troops and fifth columnists out of northern Iran. Quavam did not promise to go through with the joint exploitation scheme which Moscow suggested, but did promise to submit it, as the Constitution requires, to the Majlis.

The rejection was a foregone conclusion -- for the Majlis always balks at giving concessions on Iranian property to foreigners. After World War I, that body cancelled a far-reaching British petroleum proposal which seemed to violate provisions of the Iranian Constitution. Experts on the Near East were therefore not surprised at last week's action.

But these experts are more interested in watching for a Soviet reaction. They think that Moscow will sooner or later seek to bully the Iranian Government; but the Soviets will probably stop short of real hostilities. After all, it is pointed out, the Soviet suffered one of its worst defeats last year in Azerbaijan, where the Iranian Government ousted the Communist puppet provincial government. On the other hand, if the reaction does not come, then it will look as though the Soviets are altogether too absorbed in some other portion of the thin red line.

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Socialists are wont to attack the totalitarian practices of Communists, but judging by the following passages in an article published by the Socialist Tribune (London), October 3, they might search for the beam in their own eye. The author, Ben Roberts, in describing the university situation in British occupied Germany says (underscore our own): "In the British zone the universities have been handed over to the Germans themselves . . . The result of this policy has been, in fact, to hand the universities over to one of the worst elements in German academic life. In many cases the men who are now in control were responsible for the collapse in intellectual standards in the universities before 1933. It is true that many of them refused to join the Nazi Party, but as a Socialist professor stated to me, 'Many of the professors who now have power in the universities opposed the Nazis, not because the Nazis were reactionary but because they were too progressive in some things.'" Doubtless they were "Bourbons", as the "liberals" would say.

"A vigorous scheme", says Mr. Roberts, "for the appointment of younger and more trustworthy lecturers is needed in Germany. The right people could be found if the old die-hards were forced to resign, and if less importance was placed on maintaining the technically most qualified people. The important task in German university life today is not to restore the highest standards of scholarship, but to place the universities in the hands of people with a more democratic outlook -- even if this means a sacrifice of the standards of pure scholarship. The same arguments apply to the entrance of students."

Book Events

Reclamation of Independence, by Willis Dwight Nutting. Nevada City, California: Berliner and Lanigan. Reviewed by J. M. Lalley.

Mr. Nutting, a teacher at the University of Notre Dame, has drawn here the manifesto of what he calls the Green Revolution. This is the fanciful name adopted by the more radical and zealous advocates of the economic doctrine which is sometimes designated by the more awkward and prosaic term, distributism. The purpose, I suppose, is to distinguish it from the two other revolutionary solutions that have been proposed for the great social dilemma of our time; that is, from the Red Revolution, or Communism, and from the Brown Revolution, or Fascism.

The distributists proceed from the premise that economic independence is the only possible basis of political freedom. By economic independence they mean a condition of society in which the livelihood of each family is dependent mainly upon its own will and industry, and cannot be seriously disturbed by fluctuations of markets or of currencies, or by the conflicts of organized Capital and organized Labor or by the edicts of bureaucratic planners. Thus those Americans who, in return for greater material comforts, the diverse excitements of urban living, and the illusion of an improved social status, have bound their destiny to the business cycles, have, in effect, traded away the political liberties of their descendants. The distributists, in short, seek to arrest and reverse the trend toward centralization, monopoly and Socialism which has been proceeding at a steadily accelerating tempo since the introduction of the factory system. They propose a progressive decentralization of economic life to create a Society in which the number of self-sufficient or largely self-sufficient economic units can be multiplied indefinitely and in which the sources of production are proximate to the scene of consumption.

The distributists are not, however, like the Socialists or single-taxers, a cohesive cult possessed of a peculiar revelation and a sacred scriptures and engaged in organized propaganda -- although an exception should be made of the Distributors League in England. Many of them have arrived at their conclusions quite independently of the others. Nor is there any clear agreement among them about what steps are necessary to accomplish the reforms they contemplate, nor how far these reforms need be carried. Mr. Fred I. Raymond, author of a recent and much discussed book called The Limitist (Norton) believes, for example, that the suicidal character of Big Business is already so obvious, and its inefficiency and wastefulness so easily demonstrable, that it will suffice to restrict size of corporations and the geographical area of their operations arbitrarily by statute. Mr. Thomas Hewes, author of Decentralize for Liberty (Dutton) presents a more complex set of remedies, which, however, are also based on legislative action, plus a program of popular education.

Mr. Nutting, like Mr. Ralph Borsodi, represents a much more extreme school of distributist evangelism. He perceives no hope in purely political remedies, but urges instead a general and voluntary retreat to pre-industrial conditions. This involves a return to the land, the replacement of commercial farming by subsistence farming, the development of home industries and as far as possible household autarky and the repudiation of a money economy. All this perhaps is no very far cry from the agrarianism which Jefferson and many other Eighteenth Century theorists held to be the necessary basis of American liberties. But, as Mr. Nutting is careful to emphasize, the neo-agrarian revolution is something that will demand severe sacrifices -- not sacrifices of blood or of moralities but of those material luxuries that we have come to consider necessities. Yet the time has come, he believes, when we can no longer escape a choice between the American standard of liberty and the American standard of living.